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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000524

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
MCC FOR S GROFF, D NASSIRY, E BURKE AND F REID

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/03/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: DEVOLUTION COMMITTEE CHAIR OPTIMISTIC
VIABLE PROPOSAL WILL EMERGE

REF: 2006 COLOMBO 2094 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a March 30 meeting with Ambassador, Tissa Vitharana, chair of the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) convened to draft a devolution proposal, was optimistic the process would yield positive results. Vitharana said he expected the governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to submit a set of proposals by the week of April 2. However, an SLFP Minister later confirmed to us the party will likely hand over its draft to Vitharana on April 110. After the SLFP submits its proposal, Vitharana plans to convene weekly APRC meetings to come to consensus on twenty separate issues. Vitharana has already outlined a framework on improving language rights and permitting local levels of government greater autonomy, and believes he commands broad support. Despite objections from the Marxist, Sinhalese chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Vitharana remains hopeful the APRC can produce a devolution proposal acceptable to the bulk of Tamils and the majority of the Sinhalese community. In Vitharana's assessment, the government, while willing to work on a negotiated solution to the ethnic conflict, is also seeking to cater to its southern support base. That is the basis for reports that the government's power-sharing concept, when it finally emerges, may be so diluted that it will not meet minimum Tamil demands. The U.S. and India in particular must continue to press the SLFP to put forward proposals that will address basic Tamil concerns. End summary.

APRC: PLANS TO PROCEED

12. (C) On March 30 the Ambassador met Minister of Science, Technology, and Environment Tissa Vitharana, chairman of the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) convened to draft a devolution proposal to resolve Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict

peacefully. Vitharana said he expected the governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to submit its proposals the week of April 2. Vitharana told us that the SLFP's drafting committee is sound, and that the party is using the 2002 proposals of then-President Chandrika Kumaratunga as its basis. This bodes well for a proposal that devolves powers to a large degree, Vitharana assessed.

13. (C) Vitharana was optimistic about the APRC process, noting that he has consulted representatives of various Tamil parties and members of the Tamil diaspora, all of whom supported his initiative. He noted that he had primarily talked to groups that oppose the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but believes it is most crucial to secure the approval of the majority of Tamil civilians. Vitharana said in an interview with the Daily News published March 30 that if the APRC produces a credible devolution proposal that presents Sri Lanka's Tamils with an alternative to war, that they will turn away from the LTTE.

14. (C) On April 4 SLFP Minister Susil Premajayantha told pol FSN his party's ad-hoc devolution committee would meet that evening to further discuss its proposals for the APRC. These experts will still have to obtain SLFP central committee clearance for their concepts after the President's return from the SAARC summit in New Delhi. Premajayantha expected the SLFP to hand over its document to Tissa Vitharana around April 10. Once the SLFP submits its document, the APRC will meet weekly. This will permit parties to convene with their respective leadership committees following each session, Vitharana told the Ambassador. All salient proposals will be circulated in writing prior to each meeting. Vitharana

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expects participants to be prepared and debate substantively.

15. (C) The APRC will cover a total of twenty issues, according to Vitharana. Key among these are language rights and a shift of power to local government structures. Vitharana said he is seeking to have English included as a national language. In addition, he proposes that Tamil be the language of administration in the North and East, with the caveat that in districts with the Sinhalese forming over one-eighth of the total population, all government services are to be available in both languages. He said the same standard should be applied to provide for dual-language services in majority Sinhalese areas where over one-eighth of the population speaks Tamil.

16. (C) Vitharana envisioned investing small local units with powers over building plans and administering local road and water infrastructure. He proposed that groups of one hundred families or so would elect a village alderman, and two to three of these representatives would share an office run by an administrator. Citizens would select one of the elected representatives to attend meetings at the district level, thereby ensuring local priorities are heard. Vitharana is seeking to minimize party politics at the local government level, and noted he had received a positive response to his proposals.

17. (C) Vitharana presented his ideas to several prominent Buddhist monks, who encouraged him to move the APRC process forward, he reported. Vitharana hoped that business leaders and NGO representatives would offer more vocal support for the APRC. He noted that if any party had a reservation on any of the twenty issues, its dissent would be recorded so the party could justify its position to its constituents. Nevertheless, he expected a consensus opinion would prevail in the key issue areas. He was especially pleased with the active participation of opposition United National Party (UNP) representative Choksy. Vitharana has publicly announced a deadline of two months after the SLFP submits its proposals to hammer out a consensus APRC position. He believes he can achieve it in that time frame -- though

likely not much earlier. (Note: This would have the time frame for completing the consensus-building process slide into June, six months after the original target date. End note.)

JVP AS SPOILERS?

¶18. (C) Vitharana said that the Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was engaged in a national campaign to undermine the APRC process, accusing its members of betraying the country to act in the interests of the U.S. He said that while he had asked JVP officials to resume attending APRC meetings, he did not believe the party would engage constructively. In the March 30 Daily News interview, Vitharana assessed that the JVP would not be effective as spoilers if the two major Sinhalese parties, the SLFP and United National Party (UNP), agreed on proposals that also enjoyed the support of the bulk of the Tamil community.

THE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION

¶19. (C) Vitharana said that President Rajapaksa, while committed to finding a peaceful solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, wants to weaken the LTTE. He is very conscious that he was elected by the southern majority, and seeks to cater to his support base. Vitharana quoted the

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President saying "We have to solve the national question and resolve Tamil issues from a position of dignity and without alienating the majority." Vitharana suggested that Rajapaksa is worried that the JVP is making inroads into part of his core constituency, so he takes an especially hard line on the LTTE.

¶10. (C) Vitharana believed these worries to be unfounded. He agreed with the Ambassador's prediction that if a parliamentary election were called in the near future, the SLFP would likely gain seats at the JVP's expense. Nevertheless, Vitharana said, following the initial JVP backlash against the Panel of Experts' "Majority Report," (ref), the President considered disbanding the APRC. Vitharana lobbied hard against that measure, and created his own set of compromise proposals to convince Rajapaksa that the APRC could offer a way forward.

¶11. (C) Vitharana told the Ambassador that during the period when the Cease Fire Agreement was fully in force, the Sri Lankan military's morale was "zero." Current military engagement has made the armed services feel confident and respected in society, a feeling Defense Secretary (and the President's brother) Gothabaya Rajapaksa is actively fostering, Vitharana said. Gothabaya and others in the defense establishment perceive the peace process as a threat to morale, Vitharana felt. The key to "selling" the APRC proposals will be to focus on the benefits it brings to all citizens through greater accountability and opportunities for participation in local decision-making, Vitharana said.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Both Vitharana's newspaper interview and his discussion with the Ambassador underscored his competence and tact in moving the APRC process forward with a measured approach. With Vitharana's guidance, it is likely the parties will at least have a substantive discussion on principles to consider for a viable devolution proposal. The JVP will no doubt continue its tradition of agitation without offering realistic alternatives to war. We concur with Vitharana's assessment that if both the SLFP and UNP are on board and the bulk of Tamil civilians find the proposal credible, nationalist parties will not be able to undermine the agreement. However, it is not clear at this point that the two major parties will, in fact, achieve consensus on a proposal. The risk is that the SLFP, at the urging of the President, may put forward such a diluted proposal that could

undermine the whole APRC process. We will continue to push both parties, in private, to act in the greater interest of the country and seek common ground. It will be important to stay in close touch with Indian colleagues, who will likely be delivering the same message.

BLAKE